

PART II

Life Circumstances and Events



CHAPTER 10

Adolescent Pregnancy

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Despite a major decline in adolescent pregnancy since the early 1990s, the United States still has the highest rates of teen pregnancy and birth among developed nations. Three out of every ten American teens get pregnant by age 20 years (Kost & Henshaw, 2012). Pregnancy can have a significant impact on the life course of teens and their children because teen pregnancy and parenting interrupt adolescent development as well as teens' educational and employment opportunities. Because adolescent girls are addressing their own developmental demands, teen mothers may not have the resources to adequately parent and support the development of their children. Teen pregnancy and parenting is also a major public concern given the long-term costs associated with the poor developmental and social outcomes that are typical among teen mothers and their children.

The decline in adolescent pregnancy in the United States provides evidence that teen pregnancy is preventable. Intervention science, especially the research on resiliency and risk and protective factors, has informed the design and evaluation of interventions aimed at reducing the rate of adolescent pregnancy. This research has produced a growing body of evidence-based interventions with proven effectiveness. However, more work is needed on interventions to support pregnant and parenting teens to disrupt the pathway to long-term negative outcomes, including intergenerational teen pregnancy. Social workers with knowledge of evidence-based interventions can play key roles at the macro and direct-practice levels to

prevent teen pregnancy and to promote positive outcomes for teens and their children.

Defining and Explaining Adolescent Pregnancy

Adolescent pregnancy, commonly referred to as teen pregnancy, is pregnancy between the ages of 13 and 19 years. Usually, teen pregnancies are unplanned and occur outside of marriage. The literature on teen pregnancy addresses the important and related issues of preventing teen pregnancy as well as supporting pregnant teens and teen parents to promote positive developmental outcomes for teen mothers and their children and to prevent repeat pregnancies. In the United States, teen pregnancy is generally defined as a problem with moral, developmental, and socioeconomic dimensions. However, some segments of society consider teen pregnancy, particularly among older teens, as a positive and normative event and not as a problem (Beers & Hollo, 2009).

Among many religious and cultural groups, teen pregnancy is viewed as a “moral failure” on the part of the teen and her family. The stigma attached to teen pregnancy stems from moral values and beliefs that adolescents should abstain from having sexual intercourse and that sex before marriage is immoral. These moral beliefs have shaped every level of policy, funding, and programming related to pregnancy prevention—federal, state, and local—since 1981 by emphasizing teaching abstinence over birth control (Dailard, 2006). “Abstinence-only” policies were tightened between 1996 and 2009 by policy that